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PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SOCI SY LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: THE "BEIRUT DECLARATION" -- BACKGROUND,
FOLLOW-UP, AND REACTIONS

REF: A. PARIS 4767
 B. BEIRUT 3169

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent M. Battle for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Lebanese authorities inadvertently gave the "Beirut Declaration" -- a ringing denunciation of Lebanon's political status quo covered by the press in both Lebanon and France (Ref A) -- widespread publicity as a result of their ham-handed attempt to block the document's public unveiling. Two Shi'a political figures we talked to -- one a government minister, the other an independent, anti-establishment politician -- provided nuanced reactions to the document.
End summary.

An inside view from one of the authors

¶2. (C) One of the drafters of the "Beirut Declaration," Joseph Bahout, a professor at Beirut's University of St. Joseph, told us work began in March of this year, although the ideas behind it were "not new" but had come together over a long period of time. His collaborators -- "the usual suspects," as he put it -- included:

-- Samir Franjieh and Fares Souaid, two members of parliament from the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, a moderate, anti-Syrian Christian opposition group; both are Maronites;

-- Saoud el Mawla, a professor at Beirut's Lebanese-American University who began as a pro-Palestinian radical leftist in the 1970s but is now close to liberal Iranian reformers and Bahout's collaborator in the Arab Muslim-Christian Dialogue; he is a Shi'a;

-- Mohammad Hussein Shamseddine, a "classic" Shi'a cleric with close connections to Shi'a clerical circles in Najaf (and a former student of the late Grand Ayatollah Abdul Qasim al-Khoei, who was the highest Shi'a religious authority in Iraq).

¶3. (C) The May 2-29 series of municipal elections delayed the release of the "Beirut Declaration" until June -- its authors had originally hoped to release it sooner, according to Bahout. He was puzzled but pleased with the way Lebanese authorities had prevented him and his colleagues from holding a conference over the June 19-20 weekend, one that 2,000 participants were expected to attend, and during which the "Beirut Declaration" was to be unveiled. In doing so, the authorities had inadvertently given the "Beirut Declaration" and its organizers tremendous "free publicity," far more than they would have received otherwise, according to Bahout.

The organizers follow up

¶4. (C) Following up on the June 21 publication of the "Beirut Declaration" in the French daily "Le Monde", Bahout said he planned to work with contacts at the French daily

"Liberation" to provide further favorable press coverage. Bahout also expected the "Beirut Declaration" to be on the agenda of an annual conference of opposition and like-minded figures organized by Souaid, scheduled this year to take place on June 27.

¶ 15. (C) Bahout said the French Embassy in Beirut -- which he described as "excited" about the declaration -- had been quick to initiate contact with him, Franjieh, and other organizers once news of its stillborn public release hit the local press.

Two Shi'a reactions: an establishment one...

¶ 16. (C) In a June 24 conversation with the Ambassador, Agriculture Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, a leading figure of the Amal Movement led by parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, said he had "no problem" with the "Beirut Declaration" or its backers. He said he did not consider its release to be a very important development, however, and suggested it probably was not worth the Ambassador's time in following up.

¶ 17. (C) While some "Beirut Declaration" backers might represent a Shi'a "third force" in Lebanese politics, those individuals did not have a "program" beyond opposing both Amal and Hizballah, Khalil said.

... and an opposition one

¶ 18. (C) Riad al-Ass'ad, an independent Shi'a politician from the South and sworn enemy of Berri and the Amal Movement (Ref B), said he saw the "Beirut Declaration" as a matter of "good ideas but bad people," characterizing its organizers as "elitish" figures engaged in political "maneuvering." While the main points in the declaration, including those about Syria, were "good," its timing was "problematic" and not helpful in the current situation, Ass'ad said.

¶ 19. (C) Had the conference been allowed to take place, Ass'ad said, its main results would have been to showcase MP and possible presidential contender Nassib Lahoud (a man of integrity who has needlessly diminished himself with an excessive focus on local politics in the Metn region, in Ass'ad's view) as the chief "defender of the constitution," and to serve as a platform for the Qornet Shehwan group.

¶ 10. (C) Ass'ad said he had little use for the declaration's emphasis on "Muslim-Christian understanding." What Lebanon's Muslims and Christians really needed was a common sense of "Lebanese identity," he said.

Comment

¶ 11. (C) As Bahout told us, the main ideas behind the "Beirut Declaration" are not new. However, the document crystallizes widespread and multi-confessional dissatisfaction with the political status quo at a time when more and more observers see a renewal or extension of President Lahoud's term in office as inevitable.

BATTLE